

The Sane Asylum on Eucalyptus Hill

By Colman McCarthy

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SANTA BARBARA, Calif.—A few miles up a path-lip of road that looks out between restful palms and eucalypti to the Pacific and east to the lumbering Santa Ynez mountains, still gasping from their struggles with the spring floods, is the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. Called a think tank, a mind lab, a dreamer's refuge, an egghead monastery, scorned by the extreme right and left and ignored by the extreme middle, the stucco low-slung building that houses the 21 Fellows of the Center is essentially a sane asylum: a place of solitude where men whose minds are still intact can ponder and discuss the currently best-selling question in America, *What the hell is going on?*

The father abbot of the Center is Robert M. Hutchins. At age 29, he was dean of the Yale Law School, and at 30 he became president of the University of Chicago. Tall, straight and now 70, with a warm and cheerful heart that will endure hundreds of bores just to sift out the occasional saint or poet that may turn up, a teacher, writer, stylist, a listener, Hutchins helped create the Fund for the Republic in 1952. Backed by Ford money, the Fund quickly went into the field of civil liberties and civil rights, virgin territory then. The Fund supported the Southern Regional Council, helped fund the Commission on the Rights and Liberties of Indians, became involved in the problems of communism, immigration, censorship, segregated housing and other surface questions of the 50s.

Wanting to go deeper, as well as catch his breath, Hutchins left New York in 1959—and made the Center the Fund's sole program. For a site, 44 acres of Santa Barbara hillside was acquired, on the Grecian theory that people can think better in beautiful surroundings. Soon assembled was a community of the seeking, literate and thoughtful, commonly called, often jeeringly, intellectuals.

LOOKING BACK over the past ten years, Hutchins says that the Center has "commanded attention, (but) not all of it sympathetic. . . . The disclosures of the support of 'liberal' organizations by the CIA make it reasonable to suppose that whatever anybody is doing is a part of some conspiracy or other. In this atmosphere, it is hard to believe that the Center is doing just what it has been doing, studying democratic institutions, and has never taken the Queen's shilling."

Nor the Government's for that matter, it appears, nor the corporations', nor that of any other moneyed group that is too lazy or too preoccupied to think for itself. The Center regularly turns down the kind of Government contracts that universities and other group-thinkers pant for. It is not that Hutchins and his staff disdain Federal gravy. They just prefer to avoid the bad business that often follows when brains are rented out.

BECAUSE OF its independence, the Center on Eucalyptus Hill is unique. And, adds Hutchins simply, "when something is like nothing else, it is hard to comprehend."

Comprehension is helped greatly if one spends some time among the 21 resident Fellows. The morning begins at 9 a.m. when a supporting staff of 50—from secretaries to gardeners—arrive to open shop. By 10, the Fellows drift in. Walking around the colonnaded courtyard lined with marble walks, oaks, palms and a plaque to St. Benedict, one half expects to come upon a few Rodin thinkers hard at it.

Instead, there is James A. Pike, the flockless, churchless and some say mindless bishop, rushing along. "Sure," he says to a visitor, "I'd lead the White House's Sunday prayer meeting. But Nixon would never ask me. I'm not safe, you know."

Across the way, two sport-shirted gentlemen, with two Pulitzer Prizes, a dozen books and six degrees between them, amble around, lost in talk. Other Fellows head to their offices.

Well-seasoned before coming to the Center, they range from philosophers to physicists, politicians to professors, men who are brilliant and fairly well-known like Pike, Harry Ashmore, Edward Engberg, Rexford Tugwell, Harvey Wheeler to men who are

brilliant but less known, W. H. Ferry, Frank Kelly, John Cogley, Donald McDonald.

Four mornings a week, promptly at 11, the Fellows gather in the conference room, along with any drop-in guests. Armed with coffee, tobacco, pad and pencils, they sit around a cloth-topped table. "As in any self-respecting institution," says Hutchins about the daily meeting, "the Center Fellows are free to take individually any position they like. They all avail themselves of this privilege, sometimes in violent opposition to one another. . . . Though 'dialogue' is the American word, a candid exchange of ideas and willingness to learn from one another seem

to be harder to obtain in our country than in any other in the West. We don't really want to talk about our differences: the process is unsettling and can lead God knows where. The safest thing is to look, act and speak like everybody else."

Either a fellow or an invited guest will deliver a paper at the daily meeting, after which it is kicked around or hashed out. Everyone attending has a moral obligation to prepare for the meeting, which means reading in advance the paper to be delivered. This serves the double purpose of keeping a man from sounding off like a boob and preventing everyone else from listening to one.

After the meeting, the Fellows move into an adjoining room for a casual lunch. In the afternoon, they either read, write, talk, meditate or commiserate.

THE DAILY meetings of the Center, while seemingly little more than high-toned bull sessions, are nevertheless highly productive. Out of them come many of the articles published in the crisp, fast-growing *Center Magazine* and in the over-all publications program. The Center now has 100,000 members, who pay from \$10 a year to several hundred thousand to be on the subscription list. One comes upon Center members in all places: librarians in small Ohio towns; Congressmen and their aides who need material for speeches and programs; VISTA volunteers holed up in Appalachia and needing the Center's magazine to keep the mind active; teachers and professors on quiet campuses who want their courses and students to go deeper than the textbooks; even the military which, to the astonishment of the Center, recently ordered 2100 copies of its paper on the ABM. Then there are the thousands of members who get the magazine mostly because they still value ideas and men who are trying to make sense out of life.

Jets have made the Center accessible. Recent visitors ranged from black preacher Albert Cleage to white priest Daniel Berrigan, pacifist Dorothy Day to conservative William F. Buckley ("Gentleman, I want you to know I am here strictly as a voyeur."), activist Tom Hayden to the late contemplative Thomas Merton.

AMERICANS, feelers more than thinkers, think oddly, if not angrily, on those who use their mind. *Know-it-all, smart alec, wise guy* are terms whose root meaning is based on the use of knowledge. At Eucalyptus Hill, men gather who know a lot, if not all of it, alecs who genuinely are smart, guys who truly are wise. What saves them all from being deadly bores is that their talk is oriented to action—what should or can be done. Hutchins: "The Center tries to think about the things it thinks its fellow citizens ought to be tinkering about."

Does the country need a place like the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions? One answer is in the story about the philosopher who was asked what people would do with themselves when automation put them all out of work. He replied, they could talk with one another.

Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions

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